Statement by Ms Jan Beagle, Deputy Executive Director, UNAIDS

We know we are at a pivotal time of opportunity for transformation – for sustainable development, and for the UN system as a whole.

The defining agreements of 2015 mark a paradigm shift towards ensuring the realization of an integrated, interconnected and universal model for sustainable development aiming to secure freedom from fear and freedom from want for all, without discrimination.

But this is also a time of challenge— increased polarization around key social issues, around sexual and reproductive health and rights, shrinking space for civil society activism, and decreasing or inconsistent resources for development and human rights programmes—these impact our progress towards reaching the goals and targets across the 2030 Agenda.
As a UN system, we are committed to support countries to advance – and achieve – the ambitious, universal and integrated Agenda.

The complexity and interconnectedness the new Agenda needs new approaches to drive integration and synergy across UN system pillars, across global, regional and national levels of our work, and across the normative and operational aspects.

Putting human rights – putting people – at the centre of everything we do, is fundamental towards the change we need to see to achieve our collective vision of “no one left behind”.

For the response to HIV, mainstreaming of human rights has always been at the very heart of all efforts – it could be said this people-centered approach is part of the *modus operandi* of UNAIDS.

Because HIV is so much more than a health issue – it is a development issue, a social issue, a gender issue, a rights issue.

Because HIV often affects the most vulnerable, most marginalized people in our societies, the people most difficult to reach, the people often ‘left behind’
And because, faced with the magnitude and far-reaching realities of HIV, only a multisectoral, multistakeholder response – that is evidence and rights-based and focuses on people, rather than disease – could be effective.

That is why UNAIDS was established as a Joint Programme, bringing together and drawing on the experiences of 11 UN system Cosponsors—UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, UN Women, ILO, UNESCO, WHO, and the World Bank—and a largely field based Secretariat.

It has always been clear that HIV treatment and prevention, care and support programmes, strategies and policies will not reach the people who need them most, without addressing human rights and equality at the core – this is precisely why UNAIDS has articulated ‘Zero discrimination’ as one of the three elements of its ‘three zeros’ vision: Zero new HIV-infections; Zero discrimination; Zero AIDS-related deaths.

It is timely to discuss these issues today, the eve of the international ‘Zero Discrimination’ Day – this was first launched in 2014 by UNAIDS and is a clear illustration of how human rights considerations are at the very heart of the AIDS response.
The experience of the AIDS response, and of the Joint Programme, provide a number of critical lessons learned that can be built upon across Agenda 2030.

I would like to share four areas that we see as essential in mainstreaming human rights to drive the transformative action that is needed to implement the SDGs.

Firstly, Strategy.

The UNAIDS strategy towards ending AIDS -- adopted in October 2015 -- was the first Strategy adopted by a UN entity following the adoption of Agenda 2030, and is fully aligned with the SDGs.

Human rights and gender equality have been positioned as fundamental to achievement of the SDG target of Ending AIDS as a public health threat by 2030.

The Strategy is built on the premise of equality and non-discrimination set by the SDG Agenda and the central positioning of ‘zero discrimination’ within the UNAIDS global vision.
Aligning specifically with SDGs 3, 5, 10, 16 and 17, it re-affirms human rights and inclusion that lie at the core of effective HIV responses while linking them with the broader and transformative framework of the SDGs. It locates the HIV response at the confluence of health, dignity and social justice, as imperatives to break the cycles of inequality and exclusion that keep people away from services.

The Strategy elaborates action needed to increase access to services, including by elimination of punitive laws, policies and practices, greater efforts to tackle stigma and discrimination, particularly in health care settings and the need for greater focus on gender equality and empowerment, sexual and reproductive health and rights, increased access to justice.

It promotes vital linkages and opportunities for integrated action. Critically, it recognizes that progress made through the Strategy for AIDS will have broader impact across many development, gender and rights outcomes – and vice versa.

Secondly, data is critical for identifying people ‘left behind’.

UNAIDS has always championed the principle of ‘know your epidemic, know your response’, which emphasizes the fundamental importance of data to inform evidence- and rights-based policy and programming.
UNAIDS leads the most extensive and disaggregated data collection available on HIV epidemic and response trends. This includes innovative methods, such as collection sub-national level data, a focus on cities, hotspots and locations and populations at higher risk, and increasing availability of real-time data through the use of new technologies, including crowdsourcing.

Disaggregating data in this way enables us to see more precisely the people ‘left behind’, and how to reach them.

The UNAIDS GAP report, published in 2014, focused specifically on evidence of vulnerable groups most affected by HIV, and how to better reach the people being left behind in the AIDS response.

Policy, strategy and programme development is also informed by the HIV Stigma Index - a tool implemented for and by people living with HIV, which measures and detects changing trends in relation to stigma and discrimination experienced by people living with HIV. More than 50 countries have completed a least one round of this study since its launch in 2008.

For greatest impact across the SDGs towards leaving no one behind, it is clear that a similarly strong accountability architecture must be established at national, regional and global levels, with Indicators grounded in human rights and data that is
disaggregated as far as possible. The engagement of UN human rights mechanisms (including the Human Rights Council) in SDG implementation, monitoring, and follow up is critical.

Thirdly, inclusion.

Fulfilling the ambitions of Agenda 2030 – including the goal of Ending AIDS – will not be possible without harnessing the best our societies have to offer through meaningful inclusion and participation of civil society and communities.

This is arguably one of the greatest legacies of the AIDS movement.

Civil society, communities, individuals have been and continue to be, front and centre of the response – speaking out, demanding accountability, working together with governments, UN organizations and other partners to develop strategic solutions, policy, programming.

This meaningful inclusion of affected communities is at the heart of UNAIDS’ model—it is the only UN entity with civil society represented on its governing body. Our Programme Coordinating Board has five seats for civil society, who are actively involved in setting the governance agenda, and influencing policy and strategy decision making.
UNAIDS governing body also features thematic segments – to focus particular attention on critical issues, opportunities and challenges – where civil society and communities most affected by the issues are always included among the experts and key speakers – equal voice, equal space, equal rights.

Across the SDGs it has widely been recognised that this type of civil society inclusion is essential for achievement of the ambitious outcomes. To be fit for purpose within this context, the UN system needs to examine and adjust decision making modalities to allow greater participation by civil society and other stakeholders including the private sector and academia.

Lastly, Rights Up Front.

And critically, for those of us working for the UN system, efforts to mainstream human rights across Agenda 2030 have first and foremost to start with us all.

The dedication and commitment of our staff is critical to safeguarding HIV-related human rights and fulfilling the vision of Zero Discrimination – and ensuring our contribution to the Secretary General’s Rights Up Front initiative.
On Human Rights Day in December, we launched our own initiative to complement this - the UNAIDS Human Rights Defenders Awards - which recognize outstanding contributions made by our staff members to the promotion of human rights.

For the inaugural awards, five examples were selected of staff dedication to reducing HIV-related stigma and discrimination, responding to urgent human rights crises and advocating for the removal of punitive laws.

Among the 2015 awardees was a community mobilization and networking advisor from one of our country offices in sub-Saharan Africa, who was given the award for outstanding efforts to prevent and respond to HIV-related human rights crises linked with two high profile court cases where individuals were faced with harsh punitive action linked to sexual orientation. Through using networks and creating partnership within the justice system, civil society and by directly supporting the defense team, including attending all court sessions, acquittals were achieved in both cases.

Our regional office in Asia and the Pacific was recognized for their championing of participation and inclusion of people living with HIV, and other marginalized groups. And another staff member in West Africa helped initiate the establishment of a Coalition of Lawyers for Human Rights to provide legal services to vulnerable populations.
I’d like to share with you a soundbite from one of our awardees:

“If you work for the United Nations, your DNA has to be human rights. We have an amazing mission, but to squander that opportunity means ignoring our most important responsibility. There is no other institution in the world that provides a better platform to defend the rights of all people, most particularly those without a voice. It is the core value of the UN.”

This initiative – and others like it – emphasize the shared responsibility of the UN system to not just respond to the needs of those we serve, but also to invest in our staff as Ambassadors for change, as rights defenders. Change starts with an individual but needs the support of systems to intensify the impact.

Overcoming the challenges and maximizing the opportunities of the new development agenda requires the UN system to build on our experience, strengthen our partnerships and synergies, and reinforce our rights-based culture.

Collective, coherent and coordinated system-wide approaches that put people at the centre are the key to transformative action—to truly ensure that no one is left behind.